

## RELATIONSHIPS

# My Last Two Partners Died, And Three Years Later I'm Trying To Date Again

*If I thought it was uncomfortable to be a youngish person dating after one partner's death -- and I did -- dating with a two-for-two dead partner history is like competing in some sort of Awkwardness Olympics.*

KELLI DUNHAM · JUL 31, 2014

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I know it's time to start dating again, but I can't imagine what my OKCupid ad will look like.

Me: Middle-aged butch queer chick, comedian/writer/nurse. Friendly, funny, great smile. Last two partners died.

You: Age, personality, physical type unimportant. Just please be cancer-free.

When my first partner Heather died after a more than five-year fight with ovarian cancer, I was convinced my life was over at 38. I was sure that I wouldn't love anyone like Heather again, which was true, because I grew to love someone very unlike Heather.

My relationship with Heather was a hot, reckless, slightly absurd love affair. I called her My Queen and she called me her Chevalier and she kissed me, hard and open-mouthed, on the day she died.

She was a burlesque dancer whose elaborate costumes filled our Northeast Portland house, a barely converted Hare Krishna temple painted bright orange inside and out.

We met at a LGBT-related conference and had what we both thought was probably a conference quickie. She lived in San Francisco and I lived in Philadelphia but we kept in touch through phone calls and texts and weekend visits. She was in remission from ovarian cancer at the time of our conference liaison, but developed a recurrence and went from pretty-much-healthy to oh-shit-am-I-going-to-die in a few months. The content of our relationship changed, but never the flavor. She was the boss, and that was the arrangement, and that works very well if you're starting in a romance in an end-of-life situation. She could direct without embarrassment and I could follow without fear.



During one visit I accompanied her to a treatment, and was fussing around, getting her graham crackers she didn't ask for, and holding her hand while she fell asleep.

"It's okay, you're doing great," I said.

She opened one eye: "Who the hell are you, the chemo whisperer?"

And then we both laughed at the surprised reaction of the hospital staff that overheard our exchange.

End of life is no time for a long distance relationship, and so when she moved to Portland, Oregon, where it was much easier to be poor and sick, I moved with her. Thanks to a new treatment protocol, we got in another full year together of celebration, work and travel. We hosted a Halloween party, and Heather got up from her bed post-treatment to judge the costume contest. She spoke at a cancer survivors' conference. Even though we were both lapsed Catholics, we made a pilgrimage to the healing waters of Lourdes, France. We weren't quite sure how ironic the trip was, but we wanted to cover all our bases.

And then the chemo stopped working, and Heather said she was "tired and done." She stopped chemo, started hospice and three months later she died. The largest room on the upper floor of our barely converted Hare Krishna Temple had been a gathering space and so had an elevated stage at one end. Heather died in a bed on the stage. It made perfect sense.

Well, except for the Young Life Cut Tragically Short part it made perfect sense.

I felt like I couldn't take a breath for months.

My friends, always the heroes in my story, held me when I was coming apart and listened even when they didn't understand and tempted me out of the apartment by placing bottles of Yoohoo right outside the door.

I met Cheryl three years after Heather's death. She was a introverted performance poet with a wicked sense of humor and an impressive work ethic. Her presence was not a whirlwind; instead she was solid and doting and wasn't afraid to roll her eyes at me. We loved each other deeply and she made me trust life again.

Despite the fact that Cheryl was sober and I barely drink, our first date was at a gay bar, the only women in a sea of cruising dudes. The whole night was so awkward: when we kissed, we smashed into each other like two seventh grade boys making a move after their first dance.

Cheryl would listen to me when I talked about Heather but never seemed threatened by the Diva Ghost.

"Not be be a jerk," she'd say, in her typical lifelong New Yorker way, "but why would I be jealous of a dead person?"

After a year of dating she wrote on my Facebook wall "Happy first anniversary honey, twelve months ago we were solitary nerds. Today, we are a nerd unit."



Cheryl was also extremely healthy. She worked out three times a week, had been sober ten years and a vegetarian for twenty, and had never smoked. She was healthy until one day, quite suddenly, she wasn't. She had Hodgkin's and a cantaloupe sized tumor in her chest.

"Why do they always compare tumors to fruit," she asked me, after the oncologist left the room and it was just the two of us, trying to absorb the news.

We started a team of caregivers: Cheryl's Cantaloupe Fighting Society and I watched with awe as my girlfriend allowed her friends in, let her friends take care of her.

It never occurred to me that she would be anything other than okay, even when she developed pulmonary fibrosis, a frequently fatal reaction to the standard Hodgkin's treatment. She spent three months in the hospital, I slept on a radiator beside her. Our friends, once again the heroes, brought us food, took away our laundry, took care of our cat.

The damage to Cheryl's lungs was too extensive and she never returned home. A few hours before she died, she reached up to touch my face and said, "I'm sorry, you didn't deserve any of this," and I replied, "I didn't, but I deserved you and every moment with you has been beautiful and worth every tear."

She rolled her eyes, "Oh my God, you are such a cornball!" but she smiled. She knew I meant it.

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The whole scenario seemed impossible. My brother is career Navy and has been schooled in the ways of succinct communication. In an email sent just after Cheryl died, he wrote, "It would seem like one situation of this type would be more than sufficient."

Yup. It would seem so.

One good thing about losing two partners in a row is that you get really good at being really sad. I joined a support group, I cried a lot. I called my friends and my siblings at very odd hours. I texted my best friend, "I hate the world," to which she replied, "I hate the world for you."

After Heather died and shortly after I moved back to the East Coast, my sister had sent me a card. It said, "When it seems like it's always winter and never Christmas in your soul [a reference to the Chronicles of Narnia books we loved as kids] remember New York is a great place to start over."

I kept the card. When I moved from the apartment I had shared with Cheryl back into my former room-mate situation, it was the first thing I put up on my wall.

It's been three years now and I've started the dating process again. It's not been smooth, but I wouldn't expect it to be. I tried to date a year or so ago, but it was too early and we were too different. I met one woman through a hook-up website, and we're clearly not going to be anything but Friends With Benefits, although the benefits are smokin' hot.

If I thought it was uncomfortable to be a youngish person dating after one partner's death -- and I did -- dating with a two-for-two dead partner history is like competing in some sort of Awkwardness Olympics. I've been depending on potential suitors to Google me before they show up, but in the unfortunate instances when my date is not nosy, it's up to me to disclose.

On one second date I only mentioned the one dead partner, which led to an unfortunate third date where I had to add, "Um, but there...um...was another one too." It's clear that the timing of the disclosure is important, but I certainly haven't figured out what the right timing is. Too early and it's too much information, too late and it seems like I've been deliberately hiding it.

Then there's dealing with Lulu, who was really Cheryl's cat but now lives with me. A finicky Russian Blue, Lulu meows loudly at anyone who joins us. "Sorry, you know she was my dead partner's cat and doesn't really want anyone else in my bed," seems like an apology guaranteed to make your date bolt.

The externals are not the only problem -- I know in some ways I am not an emotional bargain. I say, "It's a lot of baggage, but it's my baggage and I know where the handle is and how to carry it," and that's mostly but not completely true. Things surprise me. A neck that smells like Heather's. An eye-roll like Cheryl's. Catching my hand in a certain way.

I don't honestly know whether my dating will lead me to someone that I will partner with in a traditional sense or whether I will have sex, make friends and collect anecdotes. And for right now, I am okay with either of those outcomes.

There is no Cinderella ending here or whatever the equivalent butch lesbian looking for a femme story would be, but there is some conclusion. I don't know whether it's good support, or resilient genes, or therapy or just the memory of how happy I was with Cheryl and Heather, but I am willing to try again.

And because of that, every time I iron my shirt and head out the door for a date, I consider it a win.

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